



Spotlight on Iran

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Author: Dr. Raz Zimmt

Overview

- ▶ Iranian-Israeli confrontation in Syria: **Ali-Akbar Velayati, the Senior Adviser on International Affairs of the Supreme Leader of Iran, warned in an interview to a Russian television channel that Israel's strikes in Syria will not go unanswered.** The senior Iranian official also threatened that if Israel attacked Lebanon, Hezbollah would destroy Israel. In addition, the Afghan Fatimiyoun Brigade militia, which operates in Syria under the guidance of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), published a video containing **a threat to reach all the way to the Golan Heights.** In the video, a fighter in the militia states that combat in Syria was only the preparation for the final confrontation with Israel.
- ▶ Following a pause lasting eight years, the Iranian Pilgrimage Organization renewed sending Iranian pilgrims to visits in the Shi'ite holy sites in Syria.
- ▶ Iran continues to try and influence the process of appointing a temporary prime minister in Iraq, in an effort to protect Iran's interests in the country. Against the backdrop of ongoing protests against Iraq and the campaigns on Iraqi social media to boycott Iranian goods, the head of the Iranian-Iraqi joint chamber of commerce stated that the trade between the two countries has not been affected by developments in Iraq. He mentioned that the volume of Iranian exports to southern Iraq has been reduced due to the protests, but that the export to Iraqi Kurdistan, on the other hand, increased.
- ▶ The Spokesman of Iraq's Joint Operation's Command, Tahsin al-Khafaji, stated in an interview to the Iraqi news website al-Maalomah, **that the security cooperation between Iraq, Iran, Russia and Syria is continuing at the highest levels in an effort to maintain stability along the Iraq-Syria border** and to prevent ISIS from gaining a foothold in the region. The senior Iraqi officer also stated that the center for intelligence sharing between the four countries continues its operation in Baghdad (Fars, December 24).

▶ Deliberations between Iran and the Houthis in Yemen: Foreign Minister Zarif met in Oman with a spokesman of the Houthi rebels in Yemen. In Tehran, the Iranian minister of defense met with the ambassador of the Houthis to Iran, and discussed **the military cooperation between Iran and the Houthis**. A report published by a Yemeni TV channel concerning signing of a first official accord for military cooperation between the Houthis and Iran was denied by a source in the Iranian ministry of defense.

Iranian Involvement in Syria

▶ On the night of December 22, Syrian state media reported that Syrian Army air defense batteries intercepted missiles fired from the direction of Israel. According to a report of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the missiles allegedly fired from Israel hit targets of the Syrian regime and pro-Iranian militias in the environs of Damascus. Following the attack, Iranian media denied reports spread on Arabic-language social media according to which the Commander of the IRGC's Aerospace Force, Amir-Ali Hajizadeh, was killed in the strike attributed to Israel.

▶ On December 25, two strikes against pro-Iranian militias were reported in the Abu Kamal region near the Syria-Iraq border.

▶ Meanwhile, Ali-Akbar Velayati, the Adviser on Foreign Affairs to the Supreme Leader of Iran, stated in an interview with the TV channel Russia Today (December 23), that sooner or later, Israel will face a response for its attacks and "crimes" in Syria. He averred that the illegal attacks by Israel in the region can not remain unanswered and that the "resistance" in Syria and Lebanon will fight against the crimes of the United States and Israel. Velayati warned that if Israel attacks Lebanon, Hezbollah will strike it "into a pile of dust." When addressing developments in Lebanon, Velayati accused Saudi Arabia and Israel of involvement in organizing protests in the country, and expressed support for Hassan Diab, who received the mandate to form a new government in Lebanon.

▶ The Afghan Fatimiyoun Brigade, which operates under the guidance of the IRGC in Syria, published a video on social media last week, in which fighters of the Shi'ite militia threaten to reach all the way to the Golan Heights. In the video, a fighter with the militia declares that the Golan Heights are the ultimate target of the fighters of the brigade, that the militia's fighters are close to Israel, and that its campaigns in Aleppo and Palmyra were only preparation for the final confrontation with the "cowardly Zionists."



**“The final goal is this tall white mountain” (the Golan Heights).
Source: Telegram channel of the Fatimiyoun Brigade, December 23**

► The Iranian Pilgrimage Organization publishes photos indicating that they have restarted sending Iranian pilgrims to Syria after an eight-year pause, following the outbreak of the civil war in the country. The photos show the first delegation of Iranian pilgrims, which left to Syria on December 12, 2019, accompanied by several of the directors of the pilgrimage organization. Until the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, over one million Iranian pilgrims visited Syria annually. The pilgrimages of Iranian citizens to Shi'ite holy sites in Syria were halted by an order of the Iranian National Security Council, after several cases of kidnappings of Iranian citizens in Syria. In 2015-2016, after the recapture of most territory from the Syrian rebels and ISIS, the Syrian Ministry of Tourism turned to Iran, requesting that it renew the pilgrimages of Iranian citizens to Syria. An agreement on the matter was even signed between the two countries, but Iran conditioned the renewal of pilgrimages on security arrangement for the pilgrims. In late 2018, the Director of the Iranian Pilgrimage Organization, Alireza Rashidian, announced that the first delegation on behalf of the organization will soon visit Syria ahead of the renewal of pilgrimages. However, they only began dispatching pilgrims recently, as mentioned (ISNA, December 16).



**The first delegation of Iranian pilgrims to Syria in eight years
(ISNA, December 16, 2019)/**

▶ On December 18, the departing Iranian Ambassador to Russia, Mehdi Sanaei, held a farewell meeting with the Russian minister on foreign affairs and the Special Envoy of the Russian President to the Middle East, Mikhail Bogdanov, and discussed the situation in Syria with him. A statement published by the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs following the meeting reported that Moscow and Tehran emphasized their commitment to maintaining cooperation for the purpose of reducing tensions in the Middle East (IRNA, December 18).



The farwell meeting with the departing Iranian ambassador to Russia with the Russian deputy minister (IRNA, December 18, 2019).

Iranian Involvement in Iraq and Yemen

▶ The Head of the Joint Iranian-Iraqi Chamber of Commerce, Yahya Al-Eshaq, referred in an interview to IRNA news agency (December 18) to the ongoing social media campaign in Iraq calling to boycott Iranian goods, against the backdrop of the ongoing protests in the country. The senior Iraqi official downplayed the importance of the calls to

boycott Iranian goods and claimed that the volume of trade from Iran to Iraq has not been affected thus far. He stated that the volume of Iranian trade with Iraq stood at USD 13 billion last year, and that while Iranian exports to southern Iraq have been reduced as a result of the protests in the region, the exports to the Kurdistan region have increased. Al-Eshaq also addressed the decision of the Iraqi government to halt the import of 17 agricultural goods from Iran, stating that this is not a new development, and that the ban instituted by the Iraqi government on import of these goods stems from a governmental decision intended to encourage economic growth, self-production and economic independence.

► In an interview to Fars News Agency (December 21), Al-Eshaq stated that the goal of expanding the volume of trade to USD 20 billion per years is still possible, and that there is no reason to worry about the state of trade relations between the two countries.



The Head of the Iranian-Iraqi Joint Chamber of Commerce, Yahya El-Eshaq (Fars, December 21, 2019).

► As Iran continues to try to influence the process of appointing the next temporary prime minister in Iraq, the Senior Adviser to the Supreme Leader on International Affairs, Ali-Akbar Velayati, stated that Iran does not support any of the candidates for the role of Iraq's prime minister. In an interview to the Russian RT television station, Velayati claimed that Iran would support any candidate elected by the Iraqi parliament. He asserted that the Iraqi people have a right to protest and that any government chose in Baghdad should be attuned to the demands of its citizens. Velayati added that the Iraqi people are entitled to select their own government and claimed that Iran did not speak to even a single senior Iraqi official to force a certain candidate for the prime minister position (ISNA, December 23).

► The Spokesman of Iraq's Joint Operation's Command, Tahsin al-Khafaji, stated in an interview to the Iraqi news website al-Maalomah, **that the security cooperation**

between Iraq, Iran, Russia and Syria is continuing at the highest levels in an effort to maintain stability along the Iraq-Syria border and to prevent ISIS from gaining a foothold in the region. The senior Iraqi officer also stated that the center for intelligence sharing between the four countries continues its operation in Baghdad (Fars, December 24).

▶ On December 24, the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, met in Oman with the Spokesman of the Ansarullah Movement (the Houthi rebels in Yemen), Mohammad Abdul Salam. The two officials discussed the latest developments in Yemen (ISNA, December 24).



The meeting of the Iranian minister of foreign affairs with the spokesman of Yemen's Houthis (ISNA, December 24, 2019).

▶ The TV channel al-Maseera, which is aligned with the Houthi rebels in Yemen reported (December 23) that the Houthis and Iran concluded their first official agreement concerning military cooperation. According to the report, the agreement was signed during a meeting between the Ambassador of the Ansarullah Movement to Tehran, Ibrahim Mohammed al-Dailami, and the Iranian Minister of Defense, Amir Hatami. In the meeting, Hatami stressed his country's support for a political solution of the crisis in Yemen and mentioned the improvement in the military capabilities of the Houthis in Yemen. A source in the Iranian Ministry of Defense denied the report that an agreement concerning military cooperation was signed between the minister of defense and the Houthis' representative (Asr-e Iran, December 24).